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Dreaming of Empire: Visions of Rome and Imperialist Ideology in Twenty-First Century Cinema

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As the Germanic hordes emerge, fur-clad and whooping, from the dark, mist-shrouded forests of Germania Magna, General Quintus remarks sourly, "People should know when they're conquered." Russel Crowe, starring as the eponymous gladiator Maximus, retorts, his voice tinged with his hallmark melancholy, "Would you, Quintus? Would I?"[1]

This paints, as we shall see, a rather inaccurate picture of the historical events that inspired *Gladiator's* action-packed opening. Yet the brief exchange between two generals in which arrogance meets empathy introduces a major theme of empire into the film. The way in which it depicts empire has led critics to call *Gladiator* an anti-imperialist work.[2] *Gladiator* (2000) would be followed by a slew of Greek and Roman epics trying to capitalize on the success of Ridley Scot's blockbuster.[3] With the notable exception of Zach Snyder's rabidly jingoistic *300* (2006), many of these cash-ins, such as *Centurion* (2010) and *The Eagle* (2011), are also viewed as anti-imperialist.[4] Critics have latched onto the clear parallels that Scott and other directors and screenwriters draw between Rome and America for the purpose of critiquing American imperialism in the twenty-first century. We should not, however, view these films as unqualified indictments of contemporary American imperialism. Their anti-imperialist impulses,

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[1] *Gladiator,* directed by Ridley Scott (2000; Universal City, CA: DreamWorks Pictures), Netflix.

[2] Jon Solomon remarks that viewers of *Gladiator* "achieve catharsis through the defeat of the Roman Empire." See *Ben-Hur* and *Gladiator:* Manifest Destiny and the Contradictions of American Empire," in *Ancient Worlds in Television and Film: Gender and Politics,* edited by Almut-Barbara Renger and Jon Solomon (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2000), 17-40, at 21. Monica S. Cyrino observes that, in the course of the film, Maximus awakens from the notion of Rome as "rightful conqueror and civilizing force over the world." See "*Gladiator* and Contemporary American Society," in *Gladiator: Film and History,* edited by Martin M. Winkler (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 124-149, at 36.

[3] For an account of *Gladiator's* stimulus of the ancient world epic film, see chapter 10. Alastair J.L. Blanshard and Kim Shahabudin, "The Return of the Epic? *Gladiator* (2000)," in *Classics on Screen: Ancient Greece and Rome on Film* (London: Bristol Classic Press, 2011), 216-237.

[4] Another outlier is *The Last Legion* (2007). These films (excepting *300*) were far less popular than *Gladiator* and, as such, have received only a fraction of the criticism lavished on their forebear.

even if intentional, are tempered by less explicit pro-imperialist ideological trappings and convictions which the works and their creators have been unable to shake. While rejecting tyranny and militant imperialism, they turn to ideals of pluralism, cosmopolitanism, and republicanism that have been inherited from early visionaries of both the American Dream and the Vision That Was Rome.[5]

This paper will explore the ways in which these films express tacit approval of imperialism. In the first place, it is necessary to review the parallel between Rome and the United States that these films explicitly draw. That done, any assumptions, criticisms, or claims the films make about Rome can be applied to America as well. I will then show how the films ultimately stop short of indicting the core institutions of Roman/American empire, opting instead to blame specific individuals or organizations within the system. I will also analyze the values the films extol, and how these are used to excuse imperialist practices. In the final section, I shall turn from Rome and its citizens and examine those who lie beyond Rome's light – the barbarians – and demonstrate how these films either depict these barbarians negatively (as quasi-human brutes) or as noble savages, primitive but admirable, and ultimately doomed.

Scholarship that treats these films as anti-imperialist critiques of America can be broadly divided into two categories: those that focus on critiques of the United States itself and those that focus on critiques of its foreign policy. One of the former is Monica S. Cyrino, who analyzes the analogies *Gladiator* makes to American politics and culture. Cyrino highlights *Gladiator's* introspection.[6] She contends that it critiques core elements of American society and advocates political reform and a cultural shift to make the United States worthy of its reputation. Chris

[5] *Gladiator*, directed by Ridley Scott, (DreamWorks Pictures, 2000), Netflix.
[6] See n2 above.

Davies, on the other hand, is far more attentive to *Centurion* and *The Eagle* because they are set on the border of the Roman empire, thereby allowing him to analyze the films' treatment of barbarians and Roman conquest.[7] Davies credits both films with critiquing American interventionism. He asserts that they depict barbarians as noble freedom fighters, not savage brutes, and that the films deliberately invite comparison between ancient barbarians and modern third world nations subjected to American occupation.

Although Cyrino and Davies have hit on intentional anti-imperialist messages, it will be seen that they are too inattentive to equally strong (if less intentional) pro-imperialist themes.[8] Like Cyrino and Davies, I will follow the parallel between Rome and America, but I will show that these films often work against themselves. They excuse the institution of empire, depict imperialism as a good policy, extol martial virtue and conquest, and show non-Romanized barbarians as savages.

Setting the Stage: America as Rome

Part of the power that *Gladiator* and its kin have over their American audience is the cultural link between Rome and America. This link allows cinema to draw analogies between Rome and the present day. While a full account of America's adoption of the classical world as its patron ancestor is beyond the purview of this paper, it will be helpful to briefly trace this phenomenon's manifestation in cinema.[9] This will then allow us to examine the specific grapnels these films cast back to Rome and then analyze their purpose and effect.

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[7] Chris Davies, *Blockbusters and the Ancient World: Allegory and Warfare in Contemporary Hollywood* (London, New York, et al.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

[8] This is especially the case with Davies, who, although he readily critiques other films (such as Doug Lefler's *The Last Legion* [2007]), provides a very one-sided assessment of *Centurion* and *The Eagle.*

[9] Retracing the thread to the neoclassical eighteenth century and even before that to the Renaissance itself would be too tedious here. For those interested in this well-trod subject, see Margaret Malamud's *Ancient Rome and Modern*

The post-war decades were the golden age of classical cinema in America. Lavish epics such as *Quo Vadis* (1953), *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Spartacus* (1960), and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) dazzled audiences with visions of a past that was hauntingly familiar. These films were part of a long tradition of invoking classical antiquity in reference to the United States.[10] To the chagrin of many pedants, these films made little effort to cleave to historical accuracy, despite their readiness to coopt actual historical figures and events into their stories – something common to the historical film genre as a whole. Peter Bondanella asserts that classical historical cinema traditionally "abbreviates history, compresses it, shapes it to diverse and sometimes contradictory purposes, and may even willfully distort it" to create meaning for contemporary audiences out of antique impressions.[11] Cinema felt no need to discard this tactic of warping history as it progressed into the twenty-first century when the classical epic experienced a renaissance with the inception of *Gladiator.* The financial success of Scott's film encouraged a slew of cash-ins and reignited Hollywood's interest in the classical epic.[12] *Gladiator* was followed by *Troy* (2004), *300* (2006), *The Last Legion* (2007), *Centurion* (2010), *The Eagle* (2011), *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014), and *Ben-Hur* (2016). The ancient world, and especially Rome, were back in force.

The resurrection of the genre by *Gladiator* signifies, to Anise K. Strong, a nostalgia not only for the golden age epics of the fifties and sixties, but a nostalgia for those decades

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America (Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), which covers the late eighteenth to the late twentieth century. For an even broader overview of classical memory in the western world at large, see Peter Bondanella's *The Eternal City: Roman Images in the Modern World* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

[10] Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 15.

[11] Bondanella 1.

[12] *Gladiator* grossed over $450 million (Solomon 17).

themselves.[13] The cinema's vision of Rome has always been a mirror held up to America. The audience sees a distorted, fictitious Rome that, intentionally or otherwise, speaks to its own values and critiques its society. Rome is an especially powerful image for this purpose because of its contradictory nature in the American psyche. Cyrino writes that in both its twentieth and twenty-first century periods of cinematic popularity, Rome has stood as "the ultimate symbol of both the sublime and the corrupt, and exhibits our own desires and doubts."[14] Rome comes to us as both an ideal republic and a decadent empire. In constructing Rome, America projects its own conflicted identity – what Solomon calls the "schizophrenic paradox" of an imperial democracy – onto the antique state.[15] Cyrino posits that *Gladiator* explores the conflict between two contradictory visions of Rome and America: virtuous republic and corrupt empire.[16] One vision is a messy reality to be critiqued, the other a utopian ideal to be striven for.

Rome, then, is America. In *Gladiator,* Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris) tells Maximus, who later repeats his words, that "There was a vision that was Rome." This is a clear analogue to the American Dream – a nebulous but powerful force in America's psyche. The dual ideal of Rome and America is a strong current in the films we will examine; it will rear its heads throughout this paper. The films' protagonists are champions of that ideal and exemplify the values of both Rome and America. This connection is critical in considering the anti-imperialist critiques these films espouse, and the pro-imperialist contradictions that underpin them.

The Good Empire

[13] Anise K. Strong, "The Golden Aspects of Roman Imperialism in Film, 1914-2015." In *Screening the Golden Ages of the Classical Tradition,* ed. Meredith E. Safran (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2019), 234.
[14] Monica S. Cyrino, "Gladiator and Contemporary American Society." In *Gladiator: Film and History,* ed. Martin M. Winkler (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 125.
[15] Solomon 21.
[16] Cyrino 128.

Gladiator, *Centurion*, and *The Eagle* all find fault with the Roman empire. They do not, however, lay these faults directly at the feet of imperialist ideology. Rather, each film attacks specific people or policies, never critiquing the institution of empire itself. Cyrino's assessment of the battle between two Romes expresses this. *Gladiator* presents a dichotomy between the Vision That Was Rome and the Roman Empire. The former is republican, just, and peaceful; the latter decadent, corrupt, violent, and tyrannical. This binary is, of course, ridiculous. Rome was never a republic in the sense Americans use the term. Whenever it was not a monarchy, it was an oligarchy of several hundred aristocrats.[17] Nor was it ever anymore peaceful before it became an empire. The reformist, liberal attitude *Gladiator* and the other films adopt conveniently ignores the core issues with the empires of Rome and America.

"It takes an emperor to rule an empire," Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) says to his sister Lucilla (Connie Nielsen), toying with the idea of dissolving the Senate. To American viewers, this idea is odious. Although they may not be familiar with the nuances of the Roman constitution, the average viewer will certainly identify the Roman Senate with the American Senate. Cyrino compares Commodus's dictatorial desires with various remarks by George Bush expressing exasperation with America's legislative body.[18] Although Bush's remarks came after *Gladiator*, Cyrino's broader point holds: Americans would probably react quite poorly if Bush – or anyone – suggested dissolving the Senate. By the end of the film, the dictator has been defeated. *Gladiator* ends with a change of policy that reinstates "institutionalized trans-regional republican government" and purportedly ends tyranny.[19] While this may have ended Commodus's dictatorship, it does not abolish the empire itself. On the contrary, by assuming that

[17] Of course, the true irony of this lies not in the dissimilarity between the constitutions of the Roman oligarchy and the American republic, but in their similarities.
[18] Cyrino 146-147.
[19] Solomon 19.

empire requires an emperor, *Gladiator* ultimately excuses both the Roman and American empires themselves. Although Octavian's First Settlement in 27 BCE established him as the first *de facto* emperor, Rome was an empire long before the Principate. After the fictional empire of *Gladiator* loses its emperor, it is still, by any metric, an empire. The film denies this truth and consequently denies the existence of American empire based on the existence of a republican legislative body. Commodus's false equivalence lets the institution of imperial Rome – and therefore imperial America – off the hook.

One of the commonly cited virtues of America is its pluralism. Likewise, the films show Rome as a multicultural state analogous to the American melting pot. But the proffering of this supposed virtue reveals the problems inherent in Rome's multiculturalism. Maximus's gladiator comrades include the Numidian Juba (Djimon Houmsou), the German Hagen (Ralf Möller), and the Scottish-born actor Tommy Flannagan as Maximus's servant Cicero. The ragtag group of Ninth Legion survivors in *Centurion* is quite the multicultural band as well. It includes the Numidian Macros (Noel Clarke), the Greek Leonidas (Dimitri Leonidas), and the Hindu Kushite Tarak (Riz Ahmed), while Liam Cunningham lends his distinctive brogue to the veteran Brick. In doing this, the films emphasize the good, cosmopolitan aspects of the Roman empire. Furthermore, they set up these peacefully coexisting cultures in opposition to the monolithic, barbarian other (Germans or Picts).[20] But this overlooks the fact that Numidians, Greeks, Germans, and Celts live in Rome because that cosmopolis has conquered them all. Multiculturalism is achieved through empire, but that source is elided or even presented as good. The viewer is meant to approve of the many different colors, faces, and voices that represent Rome while ignoring how they came to be citizens of Rome in the first place. One might as well

[20] Strong 236.

chalk up the presence of Native Americans, African Americans, and the descendants of Mexicans in what is now the Western United States to the benevolent pluralism of the state rather than a history of systematic conquest and slave trading.

Defensive Imperialism

Cyrino argues that *Gladiator* posits that Rome can be a just and positive force in the world.[21] When Maximus tells Marcus Aurelius about his estate and family in Spain, Marcus remarks that "It is a good home. Worth fighting for." This suggests that Rome's imperialism is defensive and necessary for the prosperity of its citizens, and that "the protection of the small family farm is one of the purposes of Roman military conquest."[22] Without war, Maximus's idyllic, agrarian life would be threatened. This advocacy of "defensive invasion" is a common American *casus belli.* From the Domino Theory of the Cold War to the interventionist rationales after the fall of the U.S.S.R., rhetoric has circulated about defending America's freedom and interests. The closing lines of George Bush's address in 2003, in which he announced the Iraq War, typify this attitude:

> My fellow citizens, the dangers to our country and to the world will be overcome. We will pass through this time of peril and carry on the work of peace. We will defend our freedom. We will bring freedom to others and we will prevail.[23]

Ironically, *Gladiator* is correct. Without Roman imperialism, Maximus's civilian life would not be possible. Despite his depiction as a working-class hero, Maximus is a gentleman farmer,

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[21] Cyrino 132-133.
[22] Cyrino 141.
[23] George Bush, "President Bush Addresses the Nation," March 19, 2003, The Oval Office, 4:00. I cite the transcript, which can be found here: https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030319-17.html

further identifying him with the Jeffersonian ideal of republican land ownership. His fields and orchards are almost certainly tended by slaves. He calls his estate on the outskirts of Trujillo a "very simple place," but the set – a grand villa and vast grain fields – undermines this characterization. Even the land he owns would not be his without the Roman empire. Trujillo, or Emerita Augusta, as it would have been known then, was the capital of the Roman province of Lusitania, which was conquered after a fierce and protracted campaign in the second century BCE.[24] The goodness and prosperity that Rome contains can only be acquired and maintained through war and conquest.

The Eagle, *Centurion,* and *Gladiator* show the conflict between Romans and barbarians as arising from the efforts of the former to conquer the latter. This is part of the films' intentional critique of imperialism. But even this effort is undercut by certain narrative and cinematographic choices the films make. Even though the Romans are invading armies in all three, each film manages to maneuver them into a defensive position, with the barbarians on the offensive. This makes the Romans underdogs and, therefore, sympathetic to the audience. *The Eagle's* action ramps up with a Briton attack on the Roman castra, putting the supposedly occupying garrison on the defensive.[25] At the film's climactic battle, veteran legionaries rally to the protagonist Marcus Aquila (Channing Tatum) in defense of the eagle standard against the Seal People. In both instances, Marcus is defending against barbarian attackers, and the audience is certainly meant to root for the protagonist's success to some degree. Similarly, in *Centurion,* after the Ninth Legion is annihilated by the Picts, the eponymous centurion Quintus Dias's (Michael Fassbender) band is hunted through the wilds of Pictland by Etain's (Olga Kurylenko) warband.

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[24] For an account of the difficult pacification of the Lusitani, see books 10-12 of Appian's *Spanish Wars.*
[25] *The Eagle*, directed by Kevin Macdonald (2011; Universal City, CA: Focus Features), DVD. Focus Features, 2010.

The defensiveness of the Romans is made explicit when Quintus exclaims, “They’re [the Picts] not defending their land or their country anymore.” Finally, the survivors mount a desperate last stand in an abandoned Roman fort. Once again, the audience hopes that Quintus will prevail and drive off the barbarians, which he does.

Gladiator is, perhaps, the most interesting case because the attacker-defender dynamic switches twice. Although *Gladiator,* in its effort to critique imperialism, portrays the opening battle as a Roman invasion of Germania, this is not historically accurate. On the contrary, the Second Marcomannic War which this battle concluded was one of those rare instances in which Rome was on the defensive against an invading force.[26] This historical inaccuracy would serve the film’s anti-imperialist message, were it not neutered by a reversal of the reversal. At the battle itself, the Romans are put on the defensive, presenting shield walls, trenches, and artillery emplacements to the attacking horde of Germans. And as in *Centurion* and *The Eagle,* the audience cheers when they see Maximus route the attackers and defend his position. Thus, although we are told that the Romans are invading, we are shown that they are being attacked. This weakens the anti-imperialist message at best and provides a tacit excuse for Roman invasion at worst. Invasion becomes an offense-as-the-best-defense against Rome’s pugnacious northern neighbors. Wars of conquest are justified as defensive conflicts – a familiar note in American foreign policy, as we have already seen. Conquest is necessary to facilitate and defend the Roman way of life.

[26] I say rare not because Rome was ever not under threat of invasion. By virtue of its extensive borders, it always was, but this fact is usually omitted from the common perception of Rome. Its status as the quintessential empire puts it, in the minds of many, including *Gladiator*, constantly on the offensive, and rarely on the defensive – at least, until the Dominate, when popular knowledge sees it as under constant threat from Goths, Vandals, Huns, and so forth. For a full account of the Second Marcomannic War and its predecessor, see Cassius Dio, the epitome of book 72.

The Martial Hero

Although the films proport to condemn imperialism, they fetishize war and combat. The bellicose actions of Marcus Aquila, Quintus Dias, and Maximus are presented as commendable. Marcus, Quintus, and Maximus are all viewed as somehow rescuing or seeking to fulfil the wishes of their father figures, who, in turn, are symbols of the Roman empire. Marcus seeks the Eagle of the Ninth, which is identified with his father Flavius Aquila and is itself a symbol of Rome. The eagle is also a symbol of America, strengthening the analogy.[27] The name Aquila itself identifies Flavius with the standard, and he thus comes to embody America. After surviving the Pictish ambush, Quintus first seeks to rescue General Titus Flavius Virilus (Dominic West), who is "scholar . . . father . . . brother . . . [and] god" to his men. Virilus drinks and fights with his men and, in his resplendent purple and gold, becomes himself a symbol of Roman military excellence. When he is slain by King Gorlacon, the Ninth Legion's eagle standard is burned, as if he and the eagle – the symbol of Rome and America – were linked. Maximus seeks to fulfil Marcus Aurelius' wishes. "There was a dream that was Rome," he whispers, dying in the Colosseum, "It shall be realized. These are the wishes of Marcus Aurelius." Marcus Aurelius, Titus Flavius, and Flavius Aquila are all symbols of Rome and military might. Each is in some way the object of his respective protagonist's quest to restore the glory of Rome (and, by extension, America). Thus, despite the protestations of the films, their protagonists seek to restore the legacy of great warriors. The films are nostalgic for war. It may be a different sort of war for which they are nostalgic; Quintus calls the campaign in Caledonia "A new kind of war. A war without honor. Without end." But this implies that Rome once fought good wars – wars in which good soldiers were not silenced by bureaucrats to save face (as Agricola [Paul Freeman]

[27] Davies 139.

attempts to do with Quintus), wars in which strong, virtuous men like Maximus are valued and do great deeds. The problem, then, these films argue, is not with the war itself, but with those who are running it.

Commodus, conversely, is depicted negatively as a weak, even effeminate man. *Gladiator* condemns Commodus on the grounds that he has not, like Marcus Aurelius and Maximus, expanded the borders of the Roman Empire. "He enters Rome like a conquering hero," remarks Senator Gracchus (Derek Jacobi), "but what has he conquered?" Commodus arrives late to Germany, just in time to miss the bloody conclusion to the war. "Have I missed it? Have I missed the battle?" he remarks – a line certainly meant to engender contempt for him in the viewer. It suggests, as Peter W. Rose notes, that an emperor must be first and foremost a conqueror.[28] Cyrino singles out Commodus's single anti-war remark:[29]

> Commodus: My father's war against the barbarians. He said it himself, it achieved nothing. But the people loved him.
>
> Lucilla: The people always love victories.
>
> Commodus: Why? They didn't see the battles. What do they care about Germania?
>
> Lucilla: They care about the greatness of Rome.

Cyrino sees this exchange as a scathing indictment of empire-building. But taken in the context of the film as a whole, it is insufficient to combat a far stronger impulse towards war. According to Lucilla, Marcus Aurelius' victories demonstrate the greatness of Rome. "The greatness of Rome. Well, what is that?" asks Commodus. "It's an idea . . . a vision," replies Lucilla, echoing

[28] Peter W. Rose, "The Politics of Gladiator." In *Gladiator: Film and History*, 156.
[29] Cyrino 148.

the words of Marcus Aurelius and Maximus. War is equated with the Vision That Was Rome. Thus, for Rome to be great, it cannot cease being an imperial power.

Commodus is shown as contemptable for not being a fighter. He fights only once in the film, and resorts to cheating to win. Maximus, on the other hand, is always fighting. The people of Rome – and the audience – love him for it. He imposes his vision of Rome, first on the battlefield, then in the arena, killing his way up to Commodus himself, after whose death, it is supposed, reforms can begin. Politicking is the realm of Machiavels like Commodus and the Senate, not brave, truly American (or Roman) men of action like Maximus. Strangely, James Russell claims that Maximus's victory against Commodus conveys the message that might does not equate to right.[30] But Maximus's might wins the day; his might makes his right prevail. The audience is reassured by Maximus's ability to enforce an ideology by the sword. Similarly, while audiences may recoil from the overt idea of imperialism by conquest in *The Eagle* and *Centurion*, they are encouraged to cheer for the protagonists of both films – Marcus and Quintus, respectively – who are both officers in the Roman army. Quintus introduces himself as such: "I am a soldier of Rome." This echoes Lucilla's eulogy for Maximus: "He was a soldier of Rome." Like Maximus, Marcus and Quintus exhibit martial prowess and military leadership, guiding their men and killing their enemies. These are seen as inherently good things. As already noted, Marcus's goals are noble: he seeks to recover the eagle standard and avenge his father. Quintus's goal is more practical: survival. But by casting him as the protagonist and causing the audience to root for his survival, *Centurion* implies that the Romans deserve to live, and they deserve to

[30] James Russel, *The Historical Epic & Contemporary Hollywood: From Dances with Wolves to Gladiator* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2007), 171

defend themselves against the Picts (who are themselves no longer defending their land) by force.

Although *Gladiator* was screened just before the September 11 attacks, its pro-violence message would certainly resound well with the bellicose feeling following 9/11. *Centurion* and *The Eagle* follow this glorification of the martial hero uncritically. The conflict on Rome's borders may be seen as an imperialist evil, but it is simultaneously the opportunity for good men to do great deeds. Where would these martial heroes prove themselves if there were no war or conquest?

Ultimately, *Gladiator* excuses empire by blaming its symptoms. In its view, empire has fallen from a potentially good force to a state exhausted by the responsibility for empire and the "burden of imperial obligation."[31] Thus, it is not any fault of Rome that it is corrupt. Rather, it is an inevitable burden of Rome's manifest destiny to civilize the known world and impose good Roman values upon its people. Both the American Dream and the Vision That Was Rome are positive and suggest that both states are inherently good. This ignores the fact that both states are, if not by necessity, then certainly by tradition and design, empires. By prescribing a strong dose of republican values, *Gladiator* asserts that Rome has simply lost herself. She is in need of Americanization and democratic reform in order to be made good once more.[32] Screenwriter Dave Franzoni intended a parallel between the Roman mob and contemporary American society, both of which are, in his opinion, easily placated by mass media.[33] In Rome's case this media is circuses and gladiatorial spectacles; in America's case it is television and the political spectacle. But, ironically, Franzoni ends the film with a moment of willful self-deception. At the end of

[31] Cyrino 144.
[32] Solomon 36.
[33] Solomon 32.

Gladiator, Lucilla asks Senator Gracchus, "Is Rome worth one good man's life? We believed it once. Make us believe it again." Lucilla, speaking for all of Rome, asks the Senate to convince her that Rome is worth war. She asks to be deceived. By asking Gracchus to make her believe Rome is worth war and bloodshed, Lucilla willingly hails the placating spectacle of the Vision That Was Rome, which will excuse its continued existence as an empire.

Barbarians Noble and Savage

One of the core features of any empire is its subordination of certain collectives to the imperial community.[34] As has already been observed, the Roman empire encompassed many ethno-linguistic and cultural entities. During the Principate, when *The Eagle, Centurion,* and *Gladiator* are set, most of Rome's conquests and external conflicts (with the exception of the interminable rivalry with Parthia) focused on Germans, Dacians, and other peoples from northern and central Europe. Empire justifies its existence through constructing the inferiority of its subject peoples. Imperialist ideology depicts these subjects as others that are inherently different from, and inferior to, the dominators. Although these films intend their portrayals of barbarian peoples and their environs to contribute to an overall critique of imperialism, they still fall into imperialist tropes and assumptions about the barbarians, thus reinforcing a cornerstone of imperialist ideology.

Davies convincingly argues that American audiences are meant to see the Britons in *The Eagle* and *Centurion* as analogous to the victims of American imperialist efforts. He observes that both films' cinematography alludes to the Vietnam War.[35] The Eagle, with its establishing shots of fog-choked wilderness and green, misty rivers, draws inspiration from *Apocalypse Now*

[34] See Michael Doyle's definition of empire in *Empires* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1986), especially page 30.
[35] Davies 129.

(1979), establishing Marcus's arrival in Britain as a journey into hell.[36] *Centurion* similarly harkens back to Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986).[37] Both films clearly seek to evoke the spirit of their famously anti-war and anti-imperialist predecessors. But this analogy is problematic. It draws a sharp line between the civilized space of Rome and Romanized Britain and the inhospitable, wild space beyond. Hadrian's Wall, which features in both films, is the physical manifestation of this line. It demarcates what *The Eagle's* opening crawl calls the "end of the known world," beyond which lies unconquered Pictland. *Centurion's* opening crawl likewise calls Britain the empire's "farthest, most untamed frontier;" it is an "unforgiving land." The Roman soldiers occupying Britain share similar sentiments. The garrisons in both films call the land a "shithole of a country" (*Centurion*) and a "shithole" (*The Eagle*). To Quintus Dias, it is "the arsehole of the world." "Even the land wants us dead," he continues, introducing the idea that not only is the land worthless and uncivilized, it is also hostile. Governor Agricola, his superior, calls Britain the "graveyard of ambition" and "a lost cause."

Visual elements contribute to this impression. When Marcus Aquila arrives at his posting on the marches of Roman Britain, the fort stands alone at the edge of a dark forest. No town surrounds it – just a couple of huts, emphasizing the wildness of the land. When Marcus and Esca pass Hadrian's Wall, they trek for weeks and see no farms or villages. They encounter only the odd sod-roofed hovel before reaching the crude village of the Sea People. Aside from these few signs of humanity, the land is steep mountains, bleak moors, and dark forests – a virtual wasteland. Indeed, this unflattering depiction of Britain is by no means new. Tacitus, in his *Agricola*, said that "the climate is miserable, with frequent rain and mists."[38] These wild climes

[36] Davies 138.
[37] Davies 131.
[38] *Agr.* 10, as translated by A.R. Birley. In *Agricola and Germany,* ed. the same (New York: Oxford UP, 1999).

are contrasted with Romanized Britain. Marcus recuperates from a wound in his uncle's villa in Calleva – modern-day Silchester in Hampshire, at the southern extremity of the island. Establishing shots show Roman order imposed on the British wilderness. Villas, gardens, and partitioning walls have tamed the land. The impression is idyllic – an intentional contrast to the North, which is rugged and savage, devoid of civilization or culture in any Western sense of the terms. It is believed that "No Roman could survive" north of the wall.[39]

It follows, then, that the people who can survive must be inherently different from Romans. And the films do much to enforce this suggestion. Both *The Eagle* and *Centurion,* as well as *Gladiator,* depict Rome's barbaric northern neighbors (Britons and Germans) as noble savages, both admirable and despicable for their difference. They are defined by their strangeness, inscrutability (*The Eagle*), savagery (*Centurion*), bellicosity, and technological inferiority.

The Celtic rebels that attack Marcus's castra emerge from mist-shrouded woods to the sound of tribal drums and bestial woops. They seem almost to be the angry spirits of the forest itself. Strangeness, savagery, and primitivity are central to the characterization of barbarians in these films. The Seal People in *The Eagle* fight with bone spears and stone axes, a historical inaccuracy that appears all the sillier in comparison to *Centurion,* which deigns to give its Picts well-crafted metal spears and armor. The Germans Maximus faces in *Gladiator* are covered in shapeless masses of brown and black furs and scraps of armor. They wield crude, heavy-headed weapons – hammers, axes, clubs – that demonstrate brute strength but not finesse. They charge wildly and without formation at the orderly Roman battle line. Similarly, the Celts in *The Eagle*

[39] *Centurion,* directed by Neil Marshal (2010; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures), DVD. Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2010.

attack like animals, flinging themselves onto the shields of the Roman testudo and wildly hacking with ineffective clubs. This is echoed at the end of the film when the Seal People ferociously but chaotically charge the thin but orderly line of Ninth Legion veterans. Formation fighting seems beyond the ability of the barbarians.

Celtic religion is similarly shown as exotic and strange. While destroying the Ninth Legion in *The Eagle,* the Britons conduct bodily mutilation and human sacrifice on pagan altars that are depicted as weird and foreign to both Romans and modern American audiences alike. The Seal People's shaman has a shrine in a murky seaside grotto worthy of an H.P. Lovecraft tale of ichthyoidal horror. In contrast, *The Eagle* presents Roman religion – which would no doubt seem just as foreign to modern audiences – in a more palatable form. At his castra, Marcus prays to Mithras. While this nod to the cult of Mithras that permeated the Roman military will no doubt delight historians, it also becomes a significant choice. Although communal dining was central to the cult, Marcus worships Mithras alone in a dark cell or chapel that is distinctly Christian and, therefore, familiar to the audience. Mithras, whom Marcus addresses as "Father of our Fathers," is shown in a white marble effigy, devoid of the color it would have enjoyed in antiquity to conform to modern conceptions of classical art. This pristine pallor stands in contrast to the shadowy sacred space of the Seal People. Marcus's monotheism will comfort an audience that approaches the film from a Judeo-Christian context.[40] Maximus speaks to his soldiers of Elysium and hopes to see his family in the afterlife. This is a distinctly Christian view of the afterlife – a paradise in which loved ones are reunited. He even prays to effigies of his wife and son. These religious trappings – family, heaven, and a single god – all invoke familiarity in the

[40] Realistically, Marcus would not be monotheistic. As far as the audience is concerned, however, he is.

traditional American audience. In contrast, the Britons' wild druids and animalistic, cannibalistic shaman will intrigue or repulse.

There is also a racial component to the othering process. In *Centurion,* the huntress Etain is compared to a beast. Agricola calls her part wolf; Titus Virilus takes the analogy one step further, calling her a she-wolf. Her skill as a tracker must be connected to some bestial instinct. This identification of barbarians with savage beasts is especially pronounced in *The Eagle.* The warriors of the Seal People tribe are perpetually clad in grey warpaint from head to foot. They wear spotted seal pelts and are almost completely hairless, mimicking their tribe's eponymous patron animal. This has the effect of reducing them to beasts. Furthermore, it creates a racial distinction of skin color between Marcus and his loyal slave Esca and the Seal People – a distinction that is only partially undercut by the lack of paint exhibited by the women and children of the tribe. After Marcus kills the prince of the tribe, drowning him in a river, the man's body paint washes off. It is intended to be a poignant moment that humanizes the man, showing that he really looks just like the Romans beneath all the paint. This is problematic, however. The message seems to be that the prince (played by Franco-Algerian actor Tahar Rahim) is, after all, white like us.

Despite all this, the films do succeed in humanizing the barbarians to some degree. Etain's savagery is derived from her abuse at the hands of Roman soldiers. Esca is certainly a sympathetic character. But in these efforts to portray the barbarians in a positive light, the films veer dangerously into the territory of the noble savage – a trope which is itself used to justify imperialism. In *Gladiator,* close-up shots linger on the faces of Roman legionaries, showing looks of fear and tension. This establishes a connection between the viewer and the troops. No such shots are allowed for the Germans. They are anonymous monsters, while the Romans are

depicted as a bulwark against the encroaching Germanic tide.[41] One exception is the Germanic chieftain (Chick Allan), whose berserk fury succumbs to many blows. The camera watches him as he falls, mobbed by legionaries. He becomes a sort of Dying Gaul figure. This figure is connected, in the American psyche, with Native Americans, thanks to sculptures like Thomas Crawford's *The Indian* (1856), Ferdinand Pettrich's *The Dying Tecumseh* (1856), and Peter Stephenson's *The Wounded Indian* (1848-50).[42] These statues depict the native men tragically, "doomed yet beautiful," "a consequence of . . . Indians' failure to conform to "civilized" customs."[43] Crawford's chieftain is "broken and bowed before the progress of the civilized white man."[44] Pettrich's Tecumseh and statues like it suggest "that his death and the rapacious expansion of the United States were inevitable."[45] The same effect is achieved by the camera's contemplation of the German chieftain's corpse noble and savage, sprawled on the battlefield – a symbol of Rome's inexorable conquest.

In an effort to add nuance to *Centurion* and *The Eagle*, the Romans are also shown to be savage. When the Britons attack Marcus's castra, their druid proclaims that the Romans have murdered their people, raped their women, and stolen their land. Esca informs Marcus angrily that Romans slaughtered his family. But *The Eagle* ensures that the Seal People do worse, practicing mass human sacrifice, indulging in cannibalism, and even eating babies.[46] In *Centurion*, Etain has become an inveterate killer of Romans because she was raped and had her

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[41] Strong 234.
[42] These works are currently in the New York Historical Society Museum and Library, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, respectively.
[43] See the description in the Chrysler Museum of Art's online catalog: https://chrysler.emuseum.com/objects/27315/the-wounded-indian
[44] See the NYHS's online catalog: https://emuseum.nyhistory.org/objects/17761/the-indian-the-dying-chief-contemplating-the-progress-of-ci?ctx=42755b0995554eace8b685349f2a4cce1aa419d4&idx=9
[45] See the Smithsonian's online catalog: Sso.canvaslms.com/delegated_auth_pass_through?target=https%3A%2F%2Fcanvas.odu.edu%2F
[46] Strong 236.

tongue cut out by legionaries, but the audience's pity is tempered by her own savagery and her opposition to the protagonist. Thus, the audience may condemn the actions of other Roman soldiers who committed atrocities off-camera, but they react more viscerally to the atrocities perpetrated by the barbarians themselves: atrocities which are shown on camera. Whatever the Romans may have done in the past, it is the barbarians who are committing vile acts now. Therefore, the films seem to say, the Roman protagonists are perfectly justified in fighting and subjugating them.

Civilized Barbarians

Barbarians who help the Romans are depicted in a more positive and human light. Both *Centurion* and *The Eagle* feature a Briton who aids and befriends the Roman protagonist. In *Centurion* it is the healer Arianne (Imogen Poots); in *The Eagle* it is the Brigante slave Esca (Jamie Bell). Neither is othered in the same way as the rest of the Britons in the films because both aid the films' respective protagonists, who only succeed thanks to these natives' knowledge of local lore.[47] They become sort of Sacagawea figures, guiding the foreigners through their own land so that they may prevail. Neither are shown as bestial, savage, or even really foreign. While Etain is played by a Franco-Ukrainian actress and the Seal People Prince's actor is Franco-Algerian, both Jamie Bell and Imogen Poots are English.

Arianne and Esca are also the two most Romanized barbarians. Arianne has learned Latin through contact with the nearby Roman garrison. Unlike the other Britons in the film, who are savage and bellicose, she is peaceful and more civilized. She wears not heaps of furs and pelts, but modest, homespun dresses. Her hair is not painted in woad but curled in a distinctly modern

[47] Davies 136.

fashion. She lives a sedentary life and possesses knowledge of herbs and woodcraft, but not in a way that others her as a witch. Her friendliness towards the Romans and her proficiency in their language marks her as more benevolent and civilized, especially in contrast to the other woman in the film, the Amazonian Etain. In *The Eagle,* Esca comes to love and admire Marcus for his courage, honor, and sense of duty – all martial, Roman values. In the end, Esca stays with Marcus, and Arianne becomes Quintus's lover. Both are coopted into Roman society and, finding themselves there, choose to stay.

To Strong, the acceptance of Marcus and Quintus by their barbarian lover and friend, respectively, shows Roman culture as having more good than bad: despite corrupt leadership, the Romans these films call heroes win the hearts and minds of barbarians through their virtue.[48] In *The Eagle* especially, Esca and Marcus retain their own cultures while bonding with one another – a symbol of the ideal compromise between Roman and barbarian that elides the actual relationship of conqueror and subject.[49] At the end of *The Eagle,* Esca asks what they will do now, to which Marcus replies, "You decide." This indicates that Esca has been, or will shortly be, freed, but it is also suspect. Rather than rejecting Rome entirely, Esca has come to appreciate the good it has to offer. He even helps Marcus against other Britons. Strong asserts that in these films Roman imperialism can be either repressive and authoritarian, or beneficial and civilizing.[50] The latter is seen in two civilized barbarians that the protagonists of *The Eagle* and *Centurion* encounter, who befriend Romans and adopt their customs. If Rome is more good than bad, as the films suggest, then it may have a duty to civilize.

[48] Strong 236.
[49] Strong 236.
[50] Strong 225.

Here again the films soften their anti-imperialist themes by alternately depicting barbarians as savage sub-humans, noble savages doomed to die, or good barbarians who accept the civilizing force of Rome. *Romanitas* is equated to civilization. It is alright for Marcus, Quintus, and Maximus to venture into the bleak wasteland the barbarians call home because their motives are pure. It is alright for the barbarians to die or be enslaved because it is only a natural stage in the inexorable march of Romanization – that is, progress. Is the violence regrettable? Yes. Is it ultimately noble and good? Certainly.

Conclusion

There can be no doubt that *Gladiator*, *Centurion*, and *The Eagle* were all created with some degree of anti-imperialist critique in mind. Cyrino and Davies argue this point very well. Yet it is important to critically assess these films. They contribute to popular knowledge of Rome, and in drawing a direct parallel between second century Rome and twenty-first century America, they invite a host of assumptions about modern American society and imperialism. These assumptions must be rigorously examined, else we risk complacency with the pro-imperialist ideological underpinnings these films express in spite of themselves.

The fact that intentionally anti-imperialist works of art can still so demonstrably buy into pro-imperialist sentiments speaks to the degree to which these sentiments are ingrained in our cultural assumptions and values. It is only through unapologetically revealing and analyzing these assumptions and values that we will reach a point at which the United States no longer invites comparison to the Roman Empire. It is all very well and good to decry empire, conquest, and war, but we must also divest ourselves of the belief that the Vision That Was Rome is also the American Dream. *Gladiator's* obsession with the Roman Republic belies assumptions about our own constitution, which takes so much inspiration from Rome. Deposing an emperor is no

good if we retain the empire, and oligarchy is in no way preferable to tyranny. We must not, as Lucilla does to Senator Gracchus, ask for comfort and reassurance that everything will be alright; we must unabashedly gaze at what is wrong as eagerly as we watch these films.

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